

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Spring 5-16-2020

Embracing The Cape: Increasing Social Emotional Skills Using Self-Distancing Superhero Therapy With Middle School Students- A Method

Erika Marinelli
emarinel@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Marinelli, Erika, "Embracing The Cape: Increasing Social Emotional Skills Using Self-Distancing Superhero Therapy With Middle School Students- A Method" (2020). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 290.
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/290

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Embracing the Cape: Increasing Social Emotional Skills Using Self-Distancing Superhero
Therapy With Middle School Students- A Method

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2020

Erika Marinelli

Expressive Arts Therapy Specialization

Michelle Napoli

Abstract

This research explored the benefits of incorporating pop culture into school counseling. A six-week method was implemented at a middle school which included using superhero therapy, social emotional learning, and the expressive arts. The method used self-distancing techniques to allow the clients a feeling of safety when exploring their social and emotional needs. In the six-week method, students created their own superhero using traits from popular superhero figures and had to embody their superhero to solve both fictional and realistic scenarios, both individually as well as a part of a team. Results from this method indicated that students increased their understanding of social emotional learning, self-esteem, and a way to explore traits and skills they wanted to work on. Further research on using this method may offer the ability to strengthen the therapeutic relationship and the use of multiple modalities to facilitate clients the exploration of their own inner strength. Further research of this method may also allow professionals the opportunity for further inquiry into different cultural aspects of younger teenagers today.

Keywords: superhero therapy, expressive arts therapy, school counseling, pop culture, social emotional learning, self-distancing, role play

Embracing the Cape: Increasing Social Emotional Skills using Self-Distancing Superhero Therapy with Middle School Students- A Method

Introduction

“It occurred to me that most heroes go through some kind of a struggle or a painful experience, and it is the choices they make, rather than their special abilities that make them superheroes” (Scarlet, 2017).

My method incorporates using superhero therapy groups with middle school students to help with social emotional learning (SEL) by providing self-distancing and emotional regulation strategies, such as use of pop culture and role play. “Superhero Therapy refers to incorporating characters from geek culture, including Superheroes and other characters from comic books, as well as characters from fantasy, science fiction, and video games into evidence-based therapy,” (Scarlet, 2017).

For my method I developed a six-week curriculum to use with varying aged middle school groups. I will be discussing my findings in regard to the effectiveness and benefits of superhero therapy with this population and setting. I will also be talking about how the Acceptance Commitment Therapy model (ACT) has an impact, as superhero therapy was born from the ACT approach. Part of my method involves the use of self-distancing as technique to help students further process and recognize emotions and feelings in a safe environment. Self-distancing is a positive tool for counselors and therapists to use in session with children, because it allows them to eternalize their personal problem symbolically onto imaginary others.

In my review of the literature, I have found that many schools have implemented SEL curriculum into the classrooms, and that using pop culture in therapy with children has benefits

for the therapist/client relationship. The literature also shows how self-distancing and role play can help create a solid SEL integration in school counseling.

I believe that superhero therapy with self-distancing and role play is essential to learn about because of the presence of pop culture in the lives of youths. Technology has grown tremendously through the years and children now have easy access to television, movies, YouTube, TikTok, and other social media, which continually shape their identity. As the younger generation grows up, therapy approaches need to be updated, as in any profession. Through research and the exploration of my method, I hope to encourage mental health counselors to consider incorporating pop culture into their work with today's youth.

Literature Review

I chose to create a method to support research about the use of pop culture in therapy with children. The research needed for this purpose included literature that explained SEL curriculum in schools, using self-distancing as a tool and using role play and improvisational theatre in school settings. I will also be reviewing the history and reasoning for using an ACT approach, and the effect pop culture has on today's youth. Overall, I have found that trying to find peer-reviewed journals on pop culture in therapy to be quite difficult, as it appears to be a newer method in the field of mental health counseling. To address this gap I branched out to other fandoms, such as Harry Potter and other literature-based pop culture references. The majority of the research found pop culture that is not based in social media apps such as TikTok or YouTube which is also an important influence on youth identity formation today. This gap suggests that the majority of the field is still learning how to incorporate everyday pop culture into therapy. Overall, there is a lack of literature on using pop culture in therapy which supports

the research completed for this thesis. I will discuss further the rationale and the application of my method to address this gap.

Superhero Therapy

Superhero therapy has many layers to it, from its ACT foundation, to its natural tendency for role play and expressive therapies, to the ability to incorporate SEL into school aged clients and groups. The research shows that integrating pop culture into therapy sessions with adolescents in a school setting creates a safe and inclusive environment to explore and develop a strong understanding of oneself, the ability to connect to others, and learn mindfulness techniques. Superhero therapy allows for the opportunity for natural bonding and understanding between the client and therapist, and also helps the client talk about triggering or difficult topics in a non-threatening approach. Using superhero therapy also allows the client to feel that they are not alone in their experience with mental health. An example is that Dr. Scarlet connected with the Super Mutants series when she was in middle school, due to the fact she was a victim of the nuclear power spill in Chernobyl, Ukraine. She experienced bullying from students saying she was radioactive; but after learning about how superheroes overcome their own trauma, she was able to use that as a motivator to overcome bullying. (Scarlet, 2017). Using superhero therapy, she was able to find her own inner superhero and overcome anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Pop Culture in Therapy

“In contemporary society, popular media culture is the dominant culture” (Nylund, 2007, p 13).

Popular media is prevalent in today's youth as they have access to the internet, social apps on smartphones, television, movie theatres, and books. The research has shown the multiple

benefits of using popular culture in sessions with children and young adolescents. (Nylund, 2007). One primary benefit is to improve the therapist/client relationship. Integration of pop culture into sessions can strengthen the relationship by allowing the client to connect to the therapist. It can be difficult as a child or teenager to connect to adults but bringing in the references to what they experience everyday creates connection easier and more naturally. (Nylund, 2007). Inside the session, the client/therapist relationship is dependent on many different factors. It is found that lack of connection may play a part in referrals or not continuing the therapeutic process. Being able to create connections by simply being showing regard in their interests outside of the sessions can be beneficial (Robinson & Gordon, 2008). The therapist/client relationship can be difficult when the therapist does not feel they have any common factors with their client, especially with new apps and references the youth make today. Towbin et al, looked closely into how Disney can play into therapy, and although their focus was of feminism and inclusiveness in the films, they did come to the conclusion that Disney can help in therapy. "Because most people are familiar with the story lines, and because they often follow a predictable, traditional pattern, therapist can try to help their clients see different outcomes by rewriting the stories," (Towbin, et al. 2003, p 41). This can help be an icebreaker, but also helps the therapist to learn some of their clients interests.

A person's favorite movie can help create connection and possible understanding into their reasoning process. Molly Stehn (2018) looked closely into using Disney's Frozen in therapy using the relational cultural theory (RCT) and how it relates to the relationship between therapist/clients. In the study of sisters Elsa and Ana, it is found that using these strong Disney characters can help adolescent clients connect to their therapist. "Counselors may find these examples helpful in facilitating conversations about identity, conformity, dissociation, and

ultimately, authenticity with adolescent clients” (Stehn, 2018, p 259). Using just one film can have an impact on the relationship and the empathetic understanding of each other. The client/therapist relationship can be strengthened by exploring how to express and embody meaningful superhero and pop culture characters.

The therapist can use pop culture to help explain and understand other methods than their own. In one study on family therapy, Newby, Fischer, and Reinke (1992), found that using Mary Poppins to process and understand different roles of family therapy to be beneficial and educational to professionals. Mary Poppins covers, “...eclectic techniques, from defining the problem, hiring a therapist, through implementation of interventions, to termination” (p. 42).

Research and educating oneself on pop cultural preferences of a client’s helps support the therapist/client relationship. The therapist needs to have the ability to understand the reference of which their client is talking about, but that reference could create a gap in understanding. If a client makes a reference the therapist does not know about, it is imperative they do not pretend to know, as this could cause mistrust and communication confusion. Using pop culture in therapy can help the client feel safe to discuss difficult emotions and events and may allow the therapist to enforce that safe space. Creating that safe space for a client can allow for a more genuine response and regulated behaviors.

Self-Distancing

Superhero therapy uses a tool researchers and professionals of the field know as self-distancing, which is key in creating a safe space for clients. Self-distancing may also be defined by a few similar concepts such as reframing, cognitive distancing, adaptive self-reflection, and aesthetic distancing. Self-distancing is described where the client examines the situation of a

character that relates to their own situation and analyzes it; it can be simply described as an outsider looking in, (White et al 2017).

A recent study looked at using this tool in therapy with children to see the impact of the perseverance youth have today, using a self-distancing technique. In their findings they concluded, “By taking the focus off the self, children might begin to regulate their emotional responses to those ‘hot’ aspects of the situation and respond in a more controlled manner” (White, et al. 2017). The method of shifting the focus onto a different character or object can help keep that barrier of safety in school counseling as we need the students to be regulated enough to attend the rest of the school day. Projecting the event, problem, or anxiety to another character is essential and may be a tool used in therapies with children. When reading a book, watching a movie, writing a story, or watching a musical, there are often many times during that activity we may feel connected to a character or event as media often includes problems everyday people would experience.

Think about it: Most of the fictional characters you know probably experienced some kind of a deep personal struggle, such as losing their parents, somehow being different and feeling alienated from other people, or being forced into a heroic journey that they felt unprepared to be a part of. Some faced loss along the journey, underwent deep traumatic experiences, had doubts, and battled depression or addiction. Sound familiar? (Scarlet, p 7)

In order to properly be able to self-distance oneself onto another character they need to be able to feel connected enough for that tool to be successful.

Parasocial relationships can help with self-distancing as they can create a sense of belonging and connection. A parasocial relationship is when there is a one-sided relationship.

(Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009, p 352). An example could be feeling strongly connected to Iron Man, to the point where the pain he would feel in his role can be felt through the audience member. The other person or character is unaware of the connection, and many times they have never met. Allowing oneself to have a parasocial relationship is healthy and can even create a genuine feeling of belonging. Derrick, Gabriel and Hugenberg (2009) studied whether the sense of belonging was genuine or mere escapism when watching television where parasocial relationships are present. Navigating friendships during youth can be difficult, and many times most difficult in middle school. However, having parasocial relationships can help conquer loneliness and the sense of not belonging. “The findings provide initial evidence suggesting that people may be interested in seeking parasocial relationships, especially in situations where real interactions may be perceived as problematic,” (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009, p 353). Feeling connected to a celebrity, YouTube influencer, a character, or an author may give the students a tool to understand their relationships with people they do see and interact with every day. The researchers ultimately found that, “humans can use technologies, such as television, to provide the experience of belonging,” (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009, p 352). Connecting back to the use of superheroes in therapy, this is a perfect example of how it can be used in sessions with clients, or even used in the classrooms with teachers. Allowing the clients to make a connection with pop culture can be essential and allows for a safe exploration of finding a solution to a problem. One way to apply self-distancing in therapy is using role-play and drama therapy techniques.

Role Play

Using role play in therapy is usually done in a group setting. One part of role play can involve the use of masks. Masks can either be made or bought and used in a role play scenarios.

The mask can help guide the actor/client into feeling or portraying a certain emotion or role but can also help them explore what that emotions may feel like in the body. Using masks can help with emotional regulation and processing trauma safely. “As the mask is worked with in various role-plays, both embodied by the client and addressed as if outside the self, the expression of the feeling that the mask represents becomes less frightening to the client” (Glass, 2006, p 62). The mask may help embody the persona or character easier and decrease anxiety due to the idea of hiding behind the mask.

Role play can be done with or without a script, but for the purpose of this inquiry I focused on improvisational role play. Role play helps a lot of different populations and can be done with a lot of funding or less funding, as you can have many props and costumes or none at all. Using role play is often seen in acting on stage, or reenacting a scene from a book, and acting on screen; many children use role play when playing with dolls and toys as well as playing games such as house. In the study by White et al (2017), results found that self-distancing was successful, “this condition could have been particularly accessible, and perhaps more fun, for children given their familiarity with role play,” (p 1568). Having previous experience in role play is helpful as it may allow for a more open mind and allow them to fully embody the character more efficiently than the peers with less experience.

The most accepted form of treatment for those with social anxiety is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and using improvisational theatre with CBT have been proven to reduce the symptoms of social anxiety (Felsman, Seifert, & Himle, 2019). “While improvisational theatre has been used for promoting psychology health broadly, its potential to reduce levels of social anxiety is likely because it offers exposure to social performance experiences in the face of intentional uncertainty,” (Felsman, Seifert, & Himle, 2019, p 112). Intentional uncertainty can be

intimidating to anyone, but those who constantly fear judgment can have a harder time adjusting to such exercises. Improvisation requires one to think on their feet, read and understand the rooms' energy and intensions, an ability to trust a group of potentially unknown people, and the ability to speak in front of others. Through the use of improvisational theatre groups, a student with social anxiety may feel more comfortable speaking up for themselves, the ability to read a room, and simply be comfortable around a group of people.

Role play in the form of superhero therapy can be integrated by taking on the persona of the character and truly embodying their character. In my particular method we use improvisational exercise as our superhero to solve various problems, real and fake. This can help build social thinking skills and increase tolerance levels. Superhero therapy can help build these social skills that may arise in the middle school age, and with the integration of improvisational theatre exercises in groups can benefit the client to address treatment goals.

Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning is being integrated into academic settings and is found to be essential in helping students self-regulate emotions and develop appropriate social skills. There are many different types of intelligence, social and emotional qualifies under the umbrella of intelligence. Traditionally schools use logical intelligence and we practice that with tests, projects and state/federal mandating tests. The logical state exams do not test for social emotional competency, so it is up to the school district to teach a SEL program to the students. SEL can be defined as, “emotional intelligence to come from elements such as self-consciousness, emotional management, self-direction, empathy, and social relations,” (Yukel, Okan, Eminoglu, & Akca-Koca, 2019, p 729). Many school adjustment counselors work on topics such as, self-esteem, empathy building, learning social coping skills, how to navigate

relationships, and emotional management. If a school district does not have an SEL program, then the students are left on their own to learn to manage and navigate emotions. This could also mean they learn from their surroundings such as home life, peer relations and through siblings; although this may seem great not every child has a safe and/or supportive home life or friends.

Yukel et al., (2019) found that the most crucial ages to teach SEL is in middle school, sixth through eighth grade. Luckily, the school I work with does implement SEL into their academic learning starting in fifth grade. However, many schools do not have the resources to implement SEL into their learning.

Researcher, Belinda Harris (2008) did a study in the UK regarding programs that do implement SEL curriculum but how SEL isn't successful without the support from the teachers and other staff in schools. The school environment is slowly becoming an environment that is not made for learning; the classes are getting bigger, the support for teachers is dwindling, and the curriculum is becoming more regulated and taught to pass a state exam. This is increasingly disappointing as SEL is put on the back burner to make way for academia, and with teachers feeling more burnt out than ever it also creates tension in the classrooms. "If teachers are to support young people's development then they will need to work within a climate in which love of students is not only tolerated but also embraced as essential for learning" (Harris, 2008, p 373). It is imperative that teachers are also being supported, so they can in return give that support to the students.

The majority of the students I see on my client list have a diagnosed learning disability or emotional disorders and these marginalized students have an even harder time learning and understanding SEL curriculum. "Studies consistently indicate that these children demonstrate major social difficulties, including antisocial, impulsive, hostile, and aggressive behavior"

(Shechtman & Katz, 2007, p 117). Students who may experience those emotions would greatly benefit from SEL in the classroom. Having SEL in counseling reassures that SEL is being addressed in their lives. Studies have shown greater academic success for all students, regardless of learning disabilities or emotional disabilities, if they are taught proper use of SEL in school, (Shechtman & Katz, 2007).

The research also shows that using expressive therapy based SEL groups is beneficial for adolescence. Expressive therapies can include drama, music, art, and movement; and using any and all of these methods have been proven to improve social skills and maintaining friendships. “The results of this study suggest that expressive-supportive therapy is effective in producing change in young adolescents with learning disabilities and deficit disorders” (Shechtman & Katz, 2007, p 124). Expressive therapies can help with emotional regulation as it allows another outlet to communicate and process emotions in both group and individual settings. Expressive therapies can also help develop new coping skills, which can include emotional and social skills.

In order to successfully teach the youth SEL skill building, schools need to be more learning inclusive, with teachers trained and supported in the classroom while incorporating SEL curriculum and a universal program. Integrating SEL into counseling sessions can further support SEL in schools.

Acceptance Commitment Therapy

Acceptance commitment therapy (ACT) is essential in the use of superhero therapy. Superhero therapy lays its foundations in the ACT method, as the core belief of acceptance of oneself corresponds directly with the ACT method. ACT has a mindfulness component that superhero therapy adapts and embraces. When people think of mindfulness, that mind most likely goes to meditation; but this method doesn't necessarily mean meditation but rather using

storytelling and imagery to create a mindful place (Burckhardt, Manicavasgar, Batterham, Hadzi-Pavlovic, & Shand, 2017). To master mindfulness, one needs to be able to regulate and understand their emotions and building this skill with ACT can also help the SEL skill building in both classrooms and counseling. Traditionally, the research done on ACT have been done with adults as the method was originally developed for that age group. However, the study by Burckhardt et al., applied ACT methodology with adolescents by tailoring the metaphors and exercises to be more age appropriate and easier to understand at a lower reading level. While there are many other mindfulness-based approaches they reasoned, “ACT is an appealing mindfulness program to use with adolescents compared to other meditation-based programs because adolescents may struggle to engage with meditation, particularly in a school setting” (Burckhardt et al, 2017, p 2). Ultimately, they found that ACT did have a positive impact on the adolescent that were given an ACT model, more than the control group.

Mindfulness can be a positive tool used in both classrooms and counseling, especially if rooted in ACT. Students may come out knowing how to better control their emotions, learn to handle stress both in and out of school better, as well as make social connections. ACT allows for a safe environment to learn to be comfortable being around oneself, as well as being safe from experiencing intensive emotions. “Mindfulness refers to purposely observing our experiences in the real time and without judging them.... You can think of it as a healing potion in a video game or a tabletop role-playing game. This magic potion might not taste good, but it is helpful for recovery; experiencing anxiety, depression, or other painful sensations can be unpleasant, but allowing ourselves to feel them may help us recover in the long term” (Scarlet, p 26). Mindfulness is not only an essential component of ACT but a core component of superhero

therapy. Overall, there is a lack of literature on using pop culture in therapy which supports the need for further research.

Methods

This method involves a six-week curriculum created to be used in school settings for thirty-minute sessions, with the last session lasting forty-five minutes long. The students were pulled from electives classes and did not impact their academic schedule. I worked with a total of four groups that I already had established a therapeutic relationship with prior to starting this curriculum. The different groups that I ran consisted of an eighth grade group made up of three females and one male, all aged between thirteen and fourteen, a seventh grade group made up of three females between the ages of twelve-fourteen, a fifth grade group of three boys aged ten-eleven years old, and a fifth grade group made up of three girls aged between ten-eleven years old. For the purposes of the capstone I will be focusing on primarily two groups, the fifth-grade boys group (Group B) and the seventh-grade girls group (Group A). I have chosen these particular groups to focus on due to the attendance, willingness to participate, and best fitting the needs for implementing superhero therapy into their group counseling needs. It is imperative to note that all of these students have counseling on their individualized education plan (IEP) and/or a 504a. The primary reason for IEP and 504 plans are to support disorders such as: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and intermittent explosive disorder (IED), various learning disorders (LD), and anxiety. The students were referred to me in the beginning of the school year in September by my supervisor and teachers. I have built a therapeutic relationship with each group prior to starting this curriculum as I have established these groups early in the school year; the groups have been together for six sessions prior to starting this curriculum.

The curriculum consists of six different activities which include: an introduction, creating their superhero, mask making, independent embodiment of their superhero, collaborative embodiment, and collaborative mural. Data collection was done for 30 minutes after each session, by keeping a detailed journal of what happened during group and creating art. The journals and art done by both me and the students were kept in a locked cabinet in a locked office when I left for the day.

The first session consisted of introducing superheroes, and taking a look at modern-day superheroes such as Iron Man, Captain America, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, etc. I was encouraging the students to contribute to the list and include any superheroes or heroines in books, television shows, and films. Reviewing their created list, we then listed certain characteristics that makes them a superhero such as: having superpowers, using powers for good, being brave, strong, friendly, etc. If time allowed, we would watch a clip or two of the group's favorite superheroes on the projector.

Prior to session two, I created tags that had the traits that they identified in the previous session and scattered them across the table where we met. I then asked the students to look over the different traits and to take a total of four. Two of the four traits had to be something you wanted to work on such as: have good teamwork, bravery, being kind to people, help people, etc; the other two traits could be of their choice. Then using a worksheet created, which included a space for the superhero name, superhero powers, our chosen traits, and a simple outline of a superhero with a cape to color after filling out our information. We took the remainder of the time together to fill out the sheet and color our superhero.

In session three we created masks that our superhero might wear using materials such as paint, glitters, feathers, and different scrapes of fabric. I used a blank white full-face mask that

was ordered online weeks prior. The students had the choice to create their mask in anyway, such as cutting part of it and deciding how it was decorated. Before starting the process of mask masking, I allowed each group to choose a superhero movie that was age appropriate if they wanted it in the background. The sheets they filled out the prior session were available for them to look at if they wanted to inspire and remind them who their superhero was. While we created our masks together, we talked about how superheroes have qualities that we all have the ability to have, and how human they seem, even though they are fiction and sometimes not even humans. We talked about who we may look up to in life, whether it be someone we personally know or not. We left our masks out to dry for the next session once we were done.

The fourth session took place in a large space, either the gym or the performing center and with our masks in hand we embodied our superheroes. The instructions were to walk, talk, and move how our superhero would move which took place for ten minutes. Prior to the start of the session I created a list of eight silly scenarios to solve, these included: the chairs have started walking, the color yellow was stolen from the world, the world is in slow motion, the town was under a dome, all the rivers have turned red, it was literally raining cats and dogs, the world was in black and white, and the trees have turned mean. After embodying the superhero, we each chose a scenario blindly, and had to individually solve the problem, they could act this out using the entire space we were in. I gave them a maximum of ten minutes for this, but once the problems were solved by each member, we came together to share our scenario and solution to the problem. Then with the remaining four scenarios we had to act like a team to solve the problem for the remainder of the group time. Once the time was over (regardless if all four were solved), we did an exercise to de-role our superheroes, which included physically shaking our character off and ending with a quick breathing exercise.

The fifth session was in similar fashion, but the scenarios were more relatable and customized to each group and group member. The participants were directed to ‘get into character’ and solve a problem both independently and as a team. When it was time for the team problem, there were only two problems that needed solving instead of four as in the previous week. When the time was finished, we again did the same exercise to de-role our persona before participants were dismissed to class.

Before the final session happened, I would write on a whiteboard the original traits the group came up with about what makes a superhero a superhero. There was a long white roll of paper with art supplies all around including paint, crayons, colored pencils, charcoals, oil pastels, glitter, glitter glue, watercolors, and markers. We read through our list and the choices we each chose in the beginning and compared how we embraced or didn’t embrace the different traits with the different scenarios; real or fake. While we were talking about the experience together, we collaboratively created a mural on the paper in any fashion the group wanted.

The figure below shows the six-week method in a shortened table form for clarity.

Week:	Activity:
Session One	Introduce popular superheroes. Ask groups to add additional characters. List traits as to why they are superhero and keep a record of answers.
Session Two	Using the list of traits students made, let them pick four traits for their superhero. Two traits they want to work on, and two ‘free’ traits they can choose. Use of a worksheet to create their superhero, superhero name, and choose any superpowers.
Session Three	Using blank white masks, create a mask for their superhero. We used paint, glitter, feathers, googly eyes, and stickers. I played a ‘super’ movie of their choice in the background.
Session Four	Create silly fictional scenarios. Prompt: Students get into character by imagining how they talk, walk, run, and move. Allow students to blindly take one scenario and solve independently. In 10 minutes come together as a group and explain how you solved it. Then take the remaining scenarios and time and solve all together as a team. De-role character before dismissing.
Session Five	Beforehand create real scenarios students may face. Use the same structure as in session four.

Session Six	Collectively create a mural about the process and circle back to their chosen superhero traits and whether they had the chance to work on them.
-------------	---

Results

While this method was applied to five different groups, I will only be focusing on two groups in the results section: Group A, which was a group of 7th grade girls, and Group B, which was a group of 5th grade boys. Each group chose different traits, superheroes, problem solving methods and different forms of play during the drama sessions. Group A started with some tension but presented with the most improvement, whereas group B started and maintained a positive and open mind throughout the curriculum. While I observed each group to respond differently, they both presented outcomes of increased self-esteem and a better understanding of self. Group A will be the main focus below, with some comparison points regarding group B. Due to the limited scope of this paper, I chose to primarily represent only the data of one group. I selected group A as they presented with the most change over the course of the method. Due to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic the ability to access images to provide examples for each group was interrupted. Due to this, I will only provide the images available as examples below.

Group A

Session One: Introduction

Session One	Introduce popular superheroes. Ask groups to add additional characters. List traits as to why they are superhero and keep a record of answers.
-------------	--

Observation:

In this session the students initially appeared reluctant to participate. They presented as quiet and did not present with as much energy and giggling as they have in previous groups. However, with prompting they were able to name some superheroes. They also gave examples of role models that are not typically considered superheroes. Some examples this group gave: Percy Jackson from lightening thief, Jo March from Little Women, and Scott Pilgrim from Scott Pilgrim. We also added traditional superheroes, with prompting, such as Wonder Woman, Black Widow, Wanda, Batman, and others. This group wanted to focus primarily on women superheroes. Participants also identified each other as an example of a superhero, naming all the participants as well as myself, the moderator. When listing the traits, the participants body language appeared more relaxed, and there was a lot of giggling. Towards the end of the group after a quick debrief, they appeared ready to head to their next class.

Art and journal response:

The art that I created after the group reminded me of how it was very quiet, which is a rarity with this particular group. Quiet yet tension within the group and with myself as the moderator. The art was done with paint on canvas.



Figure 1: The authors artistic response for Group A session One

Session Two: Creating Superhero

Session Two	Using the list of traits students made, let them pick four traits for their superhero. Two traits they want to work on, and two 'free' traits they can choose. Use of a worksheet to create their superhero, superhero name, and choose any superpowers.
-------------	--

Observation:

In this session we started by picking traits of a superhero and then worked on the superhero worksheet. Participants body language appeared relaxed, and everyone engaged in positive and constructive conversation. Almost all traits selected were related to social interactions such as being a good teammate and being a good friend. Some other traits they picked out were: making good decisions, being kind, brave and athletic. Participants completed the worksheets both individually but also collaboratively, while helping each other. Participants required prompts and guidance on what different could be considered. The participants appeared to become playful and creative when creating superhero powers.



Figure 2: Superhero sheet created by the author with Group B in session two

In figure 2 you can see the sheet used with the groups to create a superhero. This group chose not to choose their hero name until a later date; this was different than other groups.

Art and journal response:

My artistic response was a layer of white, to wipe away the confusion and tension of session one; a new start after a session that seemed difficult to move on from. This group in particular was usually easy to connect with, between each member and with a strong client therapist relationship. My journal for this second session consisted of positive uplifting language, in contrast to the previous session which made me second guess the success or purpose of the study.

Session Three: Mask Making

Session Three	Using blank white masks, create a mask for their superhero. We used paint, glitter, feathers, googly eyes, and stickers. I played a 'super' movie of their choice in the background.
---------------	--

Observation:

Group A chose the movie, Captain Marvel to watch in the background. This movie highlights their pattern to continue focusing on women empowerment superhero role models in this curriculum. While the movie was playing, we got together to make our masks. The feathers, paint, googly eyes, glitter, and newspapers were set up prior. When the students walked into the rooms they jumped up and down with excitement to do some art. I observed a lot of laughs and each student was being supportive of each other. I often heard positive reinforcements between each member. While the use of glitter created a mess and some dysregulated behaviors, the group was quick to regulate again before heading back to class.



Figure 3: The author's mask made for group B session three

Art and journal response:

The art that I created for this week reflects what I observed as positive and uplifting. Being able to start from a white canvas again felt intimidating but refreshing. In figure 4 you can see the cloud and balls of white, showing the progress of the sessions. I felt that the natural flow of this curriculum was starting in this session. In comparison, in Group B I observed the natural flow started much earlier.



Figure 4: Group A art response to session 3 made by the author

Session Four: Silly Improv

Session Four	Create silly fictional scenarios. Prompt: Students get into character by imagining how they talk, walk, run, and move. Allow students to blindly take one scenario and solve independently. In 10 minutes come together as a group and explain how you solved it. Then take the remaining scenarios and time and solve all together as a team. De-role character before dismissing.
--------------	---

Observation:

During this group, I observed a turning point in the participant response to the method.

Typically, there is one member that likes to leave early or come to group late. In this session, this participant asked to extend group longer and requested that they miss the next class so that they could stay. This was the first time this participant has wanted to stay the entire group time, as well as ask for additional time in the group. Two members of the group have been in theatre previously, whereas one member has not done theatre at all. I noticed that the two members who have done theatre were originally more open to the idea of play and using improvisational theatre than the other member who did not previously do any theatre. When we solved the individual fictional scenarios, the two members who have done theatre used the whole space and truly played out a scenario. The member that did not do theatre previously kept relatively quiet and stayed in a small area of the space. Each member was observed working independently and as a part of the group. As a group, we were able to solve each problem and de-role before the end of the session. Each member asked to stay longer and do more problem solving, and asked to create their own scenarios. Participants were observed as having the ability to de-role from their superhero before transitioning at the end of the session.

Art and journal response:

The art I created after this session represents growth. The trees are symbolic of growth and patience. This session showed me the power of improvisational theatre and the power of play with students who are trying hard to fit in and make meaning of their lives. I also felt like we were immersed in a world where we were



Figure 5: Artistic response for Group A session 4 made by the author

actual superheroes. I could see every scenario being played out like in a movie.

Session Five: Realistic Improv

Session Five	Beforehand create real scenarios students may face. Use the same structure as in session four.
--------------	--

Observation:

Group A was able to solve each of their scenarios both individually and together as a group. The member that has not done theatre in the past presented as just as comfortable as the other members when using the space and allowing for play. Again, all participants asked for more time and the ability to make their own scenarios. I noticed that the process of embodying their superhero was quicker and less of a character but appeared more as aspect of themselves. For example, the participants body language and use of words were more in line with their real selves rather than as their superheroes. This may be due to the nature of the problems being real life. The scenarios all related to themes around friendship and social interactions.

Art and journal response:

In my artistic I added more color and flowers into the trees. I reflected that the trees were grounding and wanted to expand the growth and progress by continuing to add to the life of the tree. The flowers represented the added growth and strength that the group discovered together.

Session Six: Mural termination

Session Six	Collectively create a mural about the process and circle back to their chosen superhero traits and whether they had the chance to work on them.
-------------	---

Observation:

When participants learned that this session was longer, they shared their happiness with jumping up and down and verbally expressing their excitement, and again asking for the session to be

even longer. This group did not present with a need for guidance on what to add to the mural.

Participants worked together on the mural, but also showed how each member worked individually in their own space. This is different than Group B, where each member worked in each other's space and added to each members' drawings.

Art and journal response:

My response for the final termination session was a movement-based response. In my office, which is bright and large, I moved authentically to the flow I observed in the mural. I put on light soft music in the background and allowed my body to feel the termination process of this curriculum. The movement was difficult at first because even though the method was completed I knew this wasn't a total termination since my work with the groups were still continuing at the school. My movement started slowly with only the upper half of my body, while I kept my feet grounded. Once the time felt right with the music and the exploration of movement, I felt more authentic and fluid. The movement solidified the experience I had as the facilitator.

This table represents significant observations in each session as a summary for clarity.

Session:	Significant observations
One: Introduce popular superheroes. Ask groups to add additional characters. List traits as to why they are superhero and keep a record of answers.	Participants chose mostly female superheroes and role models.
Two: Using the list of traits students made, let them pick four traits for their superhero. Two traits they want to work on, and two 'free' traits they can choose. Use of a worksheet to create their superhero, superhero name, and choose any superpowers.	Participants chose social and self-empowering traits for their superhero.
Three: Using blank white masks, create a mask for their superhero. We used paint, glitter, feathers, googly eyes, and stickers. I played a 'super' movie of their choice in the background.	Participants continued themes of woman empowerment by choosing Captain Marvel and working on their social skills with collaborative support of each other.

Four: Create silly fictional scenarios. Prompt: Students get into character by imagining how they talk, walk, run, and move. Allow students to blindly take one scenario and solve independently. In 10 minutes come together as a group and explain how you solved it. Then take the remaining scenarios and time and solve all together as a team. De-role character before dismissing.	Participants appeared to overcome social anxiety symptoms by using improvisational theatre. All participants were able to collectively solve problems using self-distancing techniques.
Five: Beforehand create real scenarios students may face. Use the same structure as in session four.	Participants were able to use self-distancing techniques to overcome difficult situations.
Six: Collectively create a mural about the process and circle back to their chosen superhero traits and whether they had the chance to work on them.	Participants were able to learn about their inner strengths

Discussion

This six-week method for middle school students used superhero therapy with the goal to increase social emotional learning skills. Superhero therapy consisted of using role play techniques which required self-distancing tactics. This method, which was rooted in the ACT methodology was easily integrated with the SEL program at the middle school. I observed the way role play and superhero therapy can have an impact on both students and therapist. The use of mindfulness was integrated through the practices of breathing and sense of self in space. Being aware of the way they were breathing or walking and using mindfulness in the role plays, appeared to help participants create the safety to authentically express themselves.

The use of role play and self-distancing appeared to be the most effective aspect of this method. I observed how role play can decrease the symptomology of social anxiety in this age group. For example, I have tried to engage these students in improv theatre exercises previously without much engagement. However, in in this method students actively participated in improvisational theatre exercises and asked for more time with the group. I was able to observe the students become an authentic version of themselves, without the pressure of being perfect or

normal. The world they built as their superheroes will always have an impact on me, another result I never anticipated. In response to participant feedback, I did facilitate more role play based expressive therapy directives after the method, and the participants were eager to participate!

In both groups A and B, I observed participants overcome some symptomology of social anxiety and using skills they learned in this method to further their social emotional skill set. For example, there was an instance where a teacher of one of the participants came up and told me they witnessed that particular student using their superhero to help them battle a difficult test. The participants were able to apply the method in their everyday lives.

For further research on this topic it would be helpful to do this research with a larger group. In group A there were only six participants at one school in a small town. It should also be noted that this method happened in groups where a therapeutic relationship with trust and rapport with each other was already established. It would be beneficial to see if the outcomes would differ without previous relationships between members as well as between therapist and client.

Overall, I found that this method has helped the students understand more about their own social emotional growth. They learned new coping mechanisms such as self-distancing and theatre, and they have also learned that they all have their own strengths that they can use to help themselves and others. Through observation and participation with each group, I found the method has helped my students with their social emotional skills.

References

- Burckhardt, R., Manicavasagar, V., Batterham, P., Hadzi-Pavlovic, D., & Shand, F. (2017). Acceptance and commitment therapy universal prevention program for adolescents: a feasibility study. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 11-27. DOI: 10.1186/s13034-017-0164-5
- Derrick, J., Gabriel, S., & Hugenberg, K. (2009) Social surrogacy: How favored television programs provide the experience of belonging. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(1) 352-362. DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2008.12.003
- Felsman, P., Seigert, C., & Himle, J. (2019). The use of improvisational theater training to reduce social anxiety in adolescents. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*. 63(1). 111-117. DOI: 10.1016./j.aip.2018.12.001
- Glass, J. (2006). Working towards aesthetic distance drama therapy for adult victims of trauma. In Carey, L. (Ed.), *Expressive and creative arts methods for trauma survivors* (pp. 57-71). Jessica Kinglsey Publishers.
- Harris, B. (2008). Befriending the two-headed monster: Personal, social and emotional development in schools in challenging times. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 36(4). 367-383. DOI: 10.1080/03069880802364494
- Newby, F. R. (1992). Just a spoonful of sugar helps the therapy go down. *Psychotherapy in Private Practice*, 11(4). 41-49.

Nylund, D. (2007). Reading Harry Potter: Popular culture, queer theory and the fashioning of youth identity. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 26(2) 13-24.

Robinson, S., & Gordon, G. (2008). Projecting inside: How can popular culture be used to amplify or influence the therapeutic narrative in the consulting room? *Psychodynamic Practice*, 14(2). 181-192. DOI: 10.1080/14753630801961727

Scarlet, J. (2017). *Superhero Therapy*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Shechtman, Z., & Katz, E. (2007). Therapeutic bonding in group as an explanatory variable of progress in the social competence of students with learning disabilities. *Group Dynamic: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 11(2). 117-128. DOI: 10.1037/1089-2699.11.2.117

Stehn, M. (2018). A brilliant but frosty solution: Frozen as an allegory for the central relational paradox. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 13(2), 254-261. DOI: 10.1080/15401383.2018.1426509

Towbin, M.A., Haddock, S.A., Zimmerman, T.S., Lund, L.K., & Tanner, R.L. (2003). Images of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation in Disney feature-length animated films. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 15(4), 19-44. DOI: 10.1300/J086v15n04_02

White, E., Kross, E., Carlson, S., Duckworth, A., Prager, E., & Schaefer, C. (2017). The “Batman effect”: Improving perseverance in young children. *Child Development*, 88(5), 1563-1571. DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12695

Yuskel, M., Okan, N., Eminoglu, Z., & Akca-Koca, D. (2019). The mediating role of

self-efficacy and hope on primary school students social-emotional learning and primary mental abilities. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 7(3), 719-738. DOI:

10.13189/ujer.2019.070312

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Erika Marinelli

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Embracing the Cape: Increasing Social Emotional Skills Using Self-Distancing Superhero Therapy With Middle School Students- A Method

Date of Graduation: May 5, 2020

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Michelle Napoli